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Of Cheats And Hostages

While Congress agonizes over the MX, Moscow has stepped up testing its mammoth new missiles in an apparent violation of SALT II so blatant that conservative Republican senators have renewed demands for full White House disclosure.

"Reaganaut" senators are suggesting that presidential nominations and even the MX itself will be held hostage unless President Reagan goes public. But specialists in the administration insist that an absolute violation is hard to prove, which may account for the president's uncharacteristic reticence.

For almost two years the administration has ignored conservative Republican demands for public airing of apparent Soviet SALT violations. The result has been rising animus among Reaganauts who believe that the president's rearmament (including MX) would have easier going if Congress and the voters were told the truth about giant new Soviet missiles.

Led by Sens. Orrin Hatch, Steve Symms and Jesse Helms, more than a dozen Reaganauts have considered tying MX support to Reagan's agreement that the wraps will come off alleged Soviet violations. Other hostages are Reagan nominees for

several middle-level State Department and arms control posts. "If the Gipper would tell the truth about Soviet cheating," one conservative insider told us, "you might be surprised how fast some of those nominations would clear the Senate."

An opportunity was handed the president by the CIA's disclosure of the latest test of the SS-NX-20. The 10-warhead missile with a 4,000-mile range is fired from the world's largest submarine, the Soviet Typhoon. Instead of permitting the United States to monitor such elements as the missile's throw-weight and launch-weight, as required under SALT II, the Soviets camouflaged the evidence by encrypting it.

Previous tests of this king-sized missile were 80 percent encrypted, providing the Soviets just enough leeway to claim that the 20 percent window of non-encrypted data meets SALT II requirements. But in the latest test, the Soviets coded 95 percent of the test's results. The United States could not possibly have obtained the SALT II-pledged information through the 5 percent crack.

Just before the Nov. 2 election, the president received a CIA briefing about the first test flight on Oct. 26 of a new Soviet land-based missile similar to the MX. That test was suppressed by the White House for one month, even though it also was encrypted at the treaty-violating 95 percent level.

White House handling of these latest two examples of perceived Soviet cheating has heated Reaganauts in the Senate to the boiling point. If Reagan does not go public about the lack of Soviet compliance, he risks retaliation and forfeits a way to help push his own MX missile through Congress.

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